“The Author, the Reader, and Japanese Literary Texts: Returning Poststructuralist Intertextuality to its Dialogic Roots”

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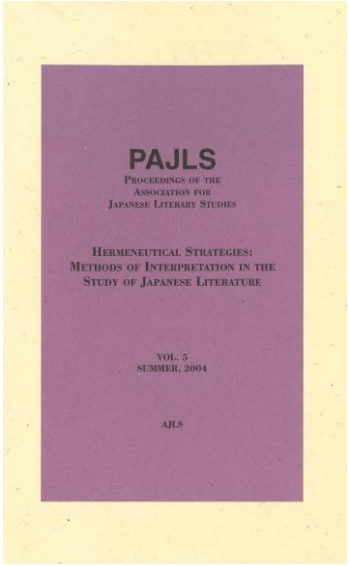

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THE AUTHOR, THE READER, AND JAPANESE LITERARY TEXTS: RETURNING POSTSTRUCTURALIST INTERTEXTUALITY TO ITS DIALOGIC ROOTS

Timothy J. Van Compernolle

My paper is an attempt to explain how I came to terms with the supremely polished sentences of the pioneering modern woman writer Higuchi Ichiyō (1872-96). What do we make of an author working on the cusp of the twentieth century crafting sentences that ceaselessly echo the literature of old, both in the sense that the prose is in classical Japanese and in the sense that those sentences constantly, almost without effort, gesture toward a corpus of anterior literary classics? At the same time, those very elegant sentences glide over each other to trace out the destinies of women and men suffering under the oppression of what must be viewed, with a little historical detective work, as distinctly modern institutions. Is there any way to read the allusions to ancient texts as somehow implicated in the representation of oppressive modern institutions and the heroines who suffer under them, or is form and content, style and theme to be forever held apart? That is, is it possible to read Ichiyō's ceaseless gestures toward the past not as antiquarianism (and still less as nostalgia), but as a response to situations of modernity? I can, I believe, convincingly demonstrate that Ichiyō appropriates and then transforms or rewrites classical tropes, language, and narrative paradigms and situates them in a new context; I can also demonstrate that this rewriting is a result of her engagement with modernity.[1] My task was to develop reading strategies that could bring together past and present, the literary and the social in a fruitful way. Rebecca Copeland has taught us that the Meiji woman writer was viewed by her male peers as the keeper of the literary traditions of the Heian court not as a full participant in the social debates going on inside and outside literary circles.[2] One of the things I want to do is show that a woman writer could occupy this role and still lodge a concerted critique of various institutions arising with modernity. I want to open a place for

[1] See, for example, my "Happiness Foreclosed: Sentimentalism, the Suffering Heroine, and Social Critique in Higuchi Ichiyō's 'Jūsan'ya,'" *Journal of Japanese Studies* (forthcoming, summer 2004).

[2] Rebecca Copeland, *Lost Leaves: Women Writers of Meiji Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000).

Ichiyō in the development of the *shōsetsu* as a form of social engagement and critique, which I believe to be an important component, perhaps even the center, of Meiji-era fiction.

The poststructuralist concept of intertextuality seems to offer a solution.[3] Intertextuality offers three welcome gestures. It transgresses the boundary between literature and the surrounding social world and thus should allow a critic to situate a text in a social field, precisely what I needed to accomplish in order to show that classical tropes and narrative paradigms are mobilized as part of an engagement with modernity in Ichiyō's oeuvre. Intertextuality offers a welcome critique of the author conceived as god, that is, as the sole source of textual meaning. This is potentially very productive in coming to terms with any writer who inherited a rich literary tradition and viewed her vocation, at least in part, as continuing that tradition. Indeed, thanks to her training in a poetry conservatory, Ichiyō could hardly avoid the rush of figures and turns of phrase she inherited from her literary forebears when she sat at her writing desk to compose. Thirdly, intertextuality offers a way to situate the reader in some relation to the text in the act of interpretation. The recovery and problematization of the reader is one of poststructuralism's most significant contributions.

Consider as a starting point for thinking about the interrelationship between these three gestures the well-known essay by Jacques Derrida called "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."[4] In the essay, Derrida introduces the concept of "decentering," or what he also calls the "structurality of structure," which insists that there is no "center," no metaphysical truth or transcendental signified, with which to fix meaning. Put in Saussurian terms, since every signifier has meaning only in a field of differences in relation to every other

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[3] Detailed accounts of intertextuality include: Thaïs E. Morgan, "Is there an Intertext in This Text?: Literary and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intertextuality," *American Journal of Semiotics* 3:4 (1985): 1-40; the introductory essay by Michael Worton and Judith Still in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 1-44; and Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, "Figures in the Corpus: Theories of Influence and Intertextuality," in *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 3-36. An extensive bibliography is included with each of these essays. See also Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000) for the latest perspective.

[4] In *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 278-93. The essay was originally given as a talk at a symposium called "The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" held at the Johns Hopkins University in 1966.

signifier, every sign carries the trace of every other sign within it. The sign system constitutes the field of the *langue*, which does not reflect reality, but in fact lies parallel to it. For Derrida, and for poststructuralism more generally, language directs us less to the real world of objects than to other signs, which, in turn, send us to still other signs, and there is, in effect, nothing to arrest the play of signification within any given structure. The fact that our philosophical systems consistently try to create a center, origin, or transcendental signified out of thin air stems from our desire to master the anxiety and uncertainty that comes from the prospect of free play and of being implicated in that play as interpreters of cultural artifacts. The center, then, served the purpose of limiting the play of the signifier within predictable, well-defined boundaries:

> The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of play. And on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the resultof a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were a stake in the game from the outset.[5]

In literary terms, the play of the signifier has been most commonly contained by appealing to the concept of authorial intention, in which all meaning in a work is folded back into the intentions of its creator. We must view the institution of the Author, then, as serving a certain function–to quell the anxiety that arises from the prospect of the inability of interpretation to fully master the signifying system of a text. The critique of the Author as transcendental subject is closely allied to the discovery that our interpretations are often as much about ourselves and our own social context as it is about the text itself. That is, the mind of the reader inevitably leaps from one sign to many other signs, which may or may not have any relationship to some kind of intended meaning or effect on the part of the author.

I want to suggest that the concepts of "decentering" and "play" introduced by Derrida ground the debate over intertextuality, which is thus pitted against a scientism of the text; the latter practice demands that each and every movement of interpretation be grounded in some tangible proof of authorial intention. On the other hand, if we push these poststructuralist gestures to their logical limit, we arrive at the scandalous position in which

[5] Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," p. 279.

anything goes, an interpretive free for all that has no grounding in text or author. Interpretation then rests entirely on the third leg of the trinity, the reader. At this extreme, any given literary text is ripped from anything resembling a unique historical context to become mere fuel for the operation of a critic's mental machinery.

What do I find unsettling about this? It is not the prospect of a dense field of explicitly or implicitly competing interpretations (a necessary aspect of every discipline, not just literary studies) that is troubling; rather, what is troubling is that the poststructuralist formulation of intertextuality is unable to handle the politics in and of textual production despite its promise, precisely because it ultimately made the reader god. At a fundamental level, intertextuality is a theory of reading that must advance its critical claims by obscuring or even bracketing the matter of authorial agency; and without some notion of agency there can be no politics, and thus no notion of the *shōsetsu* as an artistic form of social critique.

I will expand on this point in a moment, but I want to emphasize first that the eventual evacuation of the political is strange given the initial formulation of intertextuality by Julia Kristeva (it is her neologism), which depends on such active words as "transformation" and "transposition" applied to textual production. Kristeva uses intertextuality to name the idea that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another."[6] What is attractive to Kristeva in this early formulation is that, because intertextuality transcends the literary field, a text can be situated within the whole range of semiotic practices, thus opening the work to society and history and allowing us to read a text simultaneously on the formal and social levels.

In response to what she thought was a misunderstanding of her neologism, Kristeva later modified her definition by arguing that intertextuality is the transposition of sign systems: "The term *intertextuality* denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another. But since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of 'study of sources', we prefer the term *transposition*..."[7] Kristeva emphatically denies that the new concept of intertextuality is a mere synonym for source hunting; the latter is part of a larger problematic of "influence" whereby the author and the literary work are read against the

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[6] Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 37. The essay was originally published in 1969, just a few years after Derrida's talk at Johns Hopkins.

[7] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 59-60. This book was originally published in 1974.

background of a tradition of canonical literary texts, often accompanied by an evaluation of the author's originality (or lack thereof) in relation to that tradition. [8] Moreover, source hunting remains locked within the disciplinary confines of literary study, a barrier that Kristevan intertextuality, which does not privilege literary discourse over any other signifying practice, is designed to breach. In part, Kristeva's move wrenches literature out of its diachronic and purely literary framework (that is, literary history), and opens the possibility of examining the text synchronically as participating in a broader contemporary social field (which paves the way for New Historicism and other approaches). Also, by introducing the concept of intertextuality, Kristeva could do away with the older idea of language as a mere instrument utilized in the creative process by an impossibly autonomous subject; she could instead theorize a speaking or writing subject that is an intersection of multiple texts–a post-Freudian split subject, pluralized and mobile, whose utterances take shape within the system of constraints and intertexts that is language. The Kristevan project dovetails nicely with Derrida's work as a critique of the transcendental subject, that is, as a critique of the older institution of the Author, or what Derrida would call a "center." Kristevan intertextuality was mobilized as part of the poststructuralist project of "decentering" the Author conceived as creative genius and the literary text conceived as a largely autonomous work of art that, if it had connections with anything, had them only to past literary monuments.

Kristeva's battle to clearly separate allusion and influence from intertextuality is one that poststructuralism had to continually fight. The radical implications of intertextuality were always in danger of being domesticated and then (mis-)used as a synonym for influence or allusion in a more traditional literary criticism that was uncomfortable with the prospect of the free play of the signifier and a decentered subject.[9] Perhaps

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[8] A good discussion of how the perceived weaknesses in the concept of influence opened the way for the concept of intertextuality can be found in Clayton and Rothstein, pp. 4-17.

[9] A good example of this is the work of Michael Riffaterre. He repeatedly expresses the belief that intertextuality leads the reader to the one, correct meaning of the text, thus implying that critics who interpret otherwise are simply wrong. Read against Derrida's essay, it can be argued that Riffaterre has merely substituted "intertextuality" for the older notion of "authorial intention" as a way to create a new center and to situate meaning within an authoritative interpretative regime in order to counter the radical poststructuralist assertion of free play. See Michael Riffaterre, "Compulsory Reader Response: The Intertextual Drive," in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, pp. 56-78. The ideas in the essay are a development from his *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington:

this constant rearguard action explains why the reader eventually eclipsed the author in the work of Roland Barthes.

The grounding of poststructuralist intertextuality in the Derridean concepts of "decentering" and "play" is nowhere better exemplified than in Barthes' work in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The essays "The Death of the Author" and "From Work to Text," where Barthes seeks to displace the Author from a position of eminence and bring on to center stage the reader, are well known.[10] I want to emphasize, however, that his 'reader' is a purely critical concept, a theoretical point from which the various strands of the text can be untangled: "The reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted."[11] If the Barthesian reader has any connection with the real world, it isn't with historical readers (poststructuralism is, in general, spectacularly unconcerned with the problem of historical reception), but with Barthes himself, with the movements of his mind as he reads literature. The implications of this position are perhaps best glimpsed in his short book, *The Pleasure of the Text*, in which he appropriates the body as the trope of textuality. The textual body, in all its splendid multiplicity, becomes a field of play from which the reader can obtain a well nigh sexual thrill, and maybe even the *jouissance* of the explosion and dispersal of the self, by ranging across it, tying and untying textual threads however he or she pleases.[12] In this guise, intertextuality becomes a kind of erotic free association as the reader glides along the chain of signification without friction or resistance of any kind. This seductive conceptualization is Derridean "play" at its most hedonistic, and it stands in complete contrast with approaches that would treat either the text or the author as an objects of veneration.

Between Kristeva and Barthes, then, intertextuality oscillates between a concern with the signifying practices of a decentered author-subject and a celebration of readerly freedom respectively, which makes for a very confusing, even schizophrenic, formulation of intertextuality.

Indiana University Press, 1978). See also his "Syllepsis," *Critical Inquiry* 6 (1980): 625-38.

[10] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image–Music–Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 148. The essay was originally published in 1968, shortly after Derrida's talk at Johns Hopkins. Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Image–Music–Text*, pp. 159-60, originally published in 1971.

[11] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," p. 148.

[12] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975). See also Barthes' extraordinary critical performance in *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

Once we take into account the non-poststructuralist theories of intertextuality, the concept becomes so vague that it's able to encompass just about any position on the relationship between reader, writer, and text regardless of substantial theoretical differences.[13] Furthermore, if you develop too strong an allergic reaction to the transcendental subject, you end up with nothing but a theory of a reader's mind at work while reading, which ultimately effaces authorial agency and creativity all together and elides the slippery but important distinction between a critic's idiosyncratic reading and the reception of a work by actual historical readers. Poststructuralist intertextuality also tends to efface the historical context of any given text, thereby reducing every work to a mere allegory of the mysterious workings of textuality. Such a critical practice becomes especially troubling within a feminist problematic when we recognize that the poststructuralist emphasis on textuality over the production of texts poses concerns about a critical practice that might tend to erase the agency and uniqueness of a Japanese woman writer such as Higuchi Ichiyō.[14] Intertextuality ultimately does not allow one to read the literary text as a bearer of ideas or as social critique, and thus prevents us from recognizing the nineteenth-century *shōsetsu*'s newfound powers of intervening in the social world during a time of radical change, even revolutionary upheaval, in the Meiji period and beyond.

I think this problem is best handled not with more fighting about the definition of intertextuality, but by returning intertextuality to its roots in

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[13] Harold Bloom's work is often held up as a theory of intertextuality, although it is diametrically opposed to poststructuralist intertextuality. See his *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997 [1973]).

[14] Nancy Miller has been a persistent critic of this facet of poststructuralism. Her concern is that a feminist reading of women's texts needs to resist the poststructuralist tendency to erase the agency of the writer. See the essays collected in her *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), especially the essay "Arachnologies" (pp. 77-101). The problems with a reading practice that marginalizes the author, especially when such a move reinforces the age-old marginalization of women's cultural production, have been raised before in the context of premodern Japanese literature. See Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen, "Resisting Figures of Resistance," review of H. Richard Okada's *Figures of Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 55:1 (1995): 179-218, especially pp. 195-202. See also Catherine Ryu, "Configuring Female Authorship in Japanese Cultural History: The Case of Ono no Komachi" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1999), especially pp. 13-25.

Bakhtinian dialogism. [15] Dialogism is not as passive a term as intertextuality so it foregrounds the problems of agency and interpretation in a way that is more conducive to theoretical debate. Such a move has the added advantage of engaging in a fruitful dialogue with our Japanese colleagues, who are using and extending the basic Bakhtinian framework in interesting and productive ways. I have in mind here the work of Komori Yōichi, Maeda Ai, and to some extent Kamei Hideo and Seki Reiko, to mention solely essays on Higuchi Ichiyō's fiction.

Poststructuralists rewrote Bakhtinian dialogism as intertextuality, but neglected the idea of agency in Bakhtin–even though it was originally part of the theoretical apparatus of critics like Kristeva–presumably because they thought that authorial intention, even if such a thing existed, was irrecoverable. Thus, language was frequently viewed as an impersonal network. However, one might well ask of the poststructuralists whether there can really be a dialogue between texts or utterances if intentionality and agency have been completely stripped away? Certainly Bakhtin would agree with the assertion that much of what we say is borrowed without our even knowing it is borrowed, not to mention from whom it is borrowed, but dialogism also allows for an active appropriation of a word by a speaking subject who then inserts his or her own intentions into it, thereby modifying the existing meaning of a word in such a way that it contains both meanings. Bakhtinian ideas about agency can be reconciled with the poststructualist doubt about the transcendental subject by emphasizing that Bakhtin certainly does not subscribe to any idea of an impossibly autonomous subject. Peter Hitchcock, for example, has made the valuable observation that dialogism is best understood not as limited to actual dialogue, but in relation to a decentered subject: "Simply put, dialogism describes the converging and conflicting relations between and around

[15] The desire to return some degree of agency, even a hard political edge, to intertextuality became especially prominent in the late 1980s. Nancy Miller's essays have already been mentioned in the previous note. Also of great interest is Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), which makes productive use of Bakhtinian double-voiced discourse to examine African-American literary texts. In this context, it might be worth mentioning V.N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), which views language as class conflict at the level of the sign; this can be extended to include gender, racial, and other kinds of conflict within signifying practices. (Incidentally, there is still the unresolved problem of whether Bakhtin himself wrote this book under Volosinov's name.)

subject positions at any one moment, including, but not limited to, the language of putative addressers and addressees."[16]

A new point of theoretical departure can be had by revisiting the Bakhtinian view that the text is a hybrid construction consisting of images of language:

> Every novel, taken as the totality of all the languages and consciousnesses of language embodied in it, is a *hybrid.* But we emphasize once again: it is an intentional and conscious hybrid, one artistically organized, and not an opaque mechanistic mixture of languages (more precisely, a mixture of the brute elements of language). *The artistic image of a language*–such is the aim that novelistic hybridization sets for itself [italics in the original].[17]

Though we might question (as many have) Bakhtin's bias toward the novel, his assertion still has value: the literary text is an artistic ordering of voices, that is, representations of language. The representation of language necessarily entails the appropriation of discourses, social, artistic, and others, which are brought into the artistic order of the text even as they retain the charge from their life in other contexts. In the text, they interact with other voices or discourses, can be commented upon, parodied, and such. The discourses of which the literary text is comprised are never exclusively literary: they are also social and historical. Acknowledgment of this view makes untenable any position that sees an interior literary world sealed off from a socio-political outside, a literary world in which one literary text relates itself solely to other literary texts. Indeed the Bakhtinian conceptualization deconstructs (in the technical literary-critical sense of the word) the binary opposition between the inside and the outside of the literary text. The representation of language entails the textualization of discourses, which are present in the artistic ordering of the literary work precisely because that text is produced out of language. There is interaction, tension, and potentially dialogue within any given text between these discourses, both past and present, literary and social, of which it is composed. I would want to make this idea of the representation of language the core of a rejuvenated historicist criticism, one that allows

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[16] Peter Hitchcock, "Introduction: *Bakhtin/'Bakhtin',*" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 97: 3/4 (1988): 516.

[17] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 366.

us to read Ichiyō's ceaseless gestures toward her literary forebears as part of an engagement with the world around her.

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